

GUIDELINES FOR TAPING SPOKEN LANGUAGE

The only way to conduct research on conversation is to tape it, and some guidelines might be useful.

- You need to get permission from speakers before recording them.
- Often, at the beginning of the recording, the speakers can be either nervous or very self-conscious. This can make the conversation appear to lack spontaneity. As the speakers warm up, however, they forget the tape recorder is present and relax into more 'normal' conversation.
- We can never be entirely sure, however, what is 'normal' conversation. As soon as we attempt to record it, we experience what is known as 'observer's paradox', that is, we cannot be sure how far the observation of a conversation has influenced what has been said.
- It would be easier, therefore, at times, to record conversation without people knowing that this was happening. In this situation, ask the person's permission to use the material recorded when the recording is over.
- Preserve the anonymity of your speakers and change their names on the transcription.

Notes on transcription

Obviously, capturing spoken language in a written form can be a time-consuming and difficult process.

The physical context of the conversation which can be integral to its understanding does not, for example, form part of a transcription. Nor does body language, such as gestures or facial expressions, though sounds such as laughter or swearing can be described in brackets, for example (laughter).

Different types of transcriptions capture different levels of the conversation. The prosodic features (speed, stress, volume and intonation) can be indicated.

The exact pronunciation of the speakers can also be indicated by the use of the phonemic alphabet: pU^b, for example, indicates the northern pronunciation of the word *pub*, bQO shows the short 'a' sound, again part of northern accent. Words are not always pronounced as individual, separate units, so *wanna* could indicate the informal pronunciation of 'want to'.

Pauses, silences and sounds, such as voiced pauses, e.g. *er* and *um*, where the speaker hesitates, should also be marked, as should overlaps, where speakers talk simultaneously.

In a transcription, normal punctuation does not apply, and the following principles have been adhered to in this book:

- Prosodic features are not marked though question marks and exclamation marks have been used where helpful and indicate some change in intonation.
- Noises which are not proper words but still communicate have been indicated, e.g. *argh* or *wow*, as have other sounds such as laughter. Where the tape has become inaudible, this too has been indicated.
- Pronunciation has not been concentrated on. The phonemic alphabet has not been used, though informality is shown with words such as *yeah*.
- Voiced pauses indicating hesitation or thinking time have been transcribed, for example, *er*, *erm* or *um*.

- Brackets with a dot (.) indicate a brief pause but one which, for a particular speaker, is longer than the normal pause at the end of a grammatical unit. The number of seconds paused, e.g. (2), has been recorded in brackets for even longer pauses.
- Where speakers overlap and speak simultaneously, this has been marked by underlining.
- Where sources are not given, the data are from my own or my students' transcriptions of the conversation of family, friends and acquaintances.